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MAY 14, 2007

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Cheap, audience-driven "unconferences" are shaking up the convention biz

Free classified ads on Craigslist threaten newspapers. Open-source software is gaining on Microsoft ([MSFT](#)) and Oracle ([ORCL](#)). Now the convention business faces its own Web-inspired competition: the "unconference."

Unconferences turn the plodding, predictable business gathering inside out. They're a hybrid of a teach-in and a jam session, with a little show-and-tell mixed in, and they are attracting hundreds in cities like Austin, Tex., Bangalore, San Francisco, Sydney, and Tokyo. Unlike traditional, \$1,000-a-head and up conferences, they're totally unstructured—the agenda isn't determined until the opening day of the event. Everyone who shows up is a potential speaker, and those who don't speak contribute by posting photos, blog entries, podcasts, and video clips of the proceedings. Neckties and heels are noticeably absent. And attendance is almost always inexpensive or free.

Dozens of the meetings are popping up, and in some surprising sectors. In Paris there have been three unconferences devoted to banking and finance. In February, Toronto Transit Camp was a day-long brainstorming session about improving public transit in the city. ArtCamp, held in Vancouver, included a session on "Photoconceptualism and the Moving Image." Wine-Camp, which, along with wine-tasting, was dedicated to the ways nonprofits use technology, was held at a vineyard in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains last spring.

These "camps" are one of the fastest-growing types of unconferences—there's a

DemoCamp (for new technology demos), a GameCamp! (for videogame development), and a BarCamp (for general technology topics). The month of May will see camps take place in Bologna, Brussels, Turin, Montreal, Calgary, and Portland, Ore.

Proponents draw a parallel to other crowd-driven movements that threaten to unseat highly profitable business models. "Unconferences will totally displace the more staid, big, established conferences," predicts Doug Gold, who runs a Massachusetts startup, Mass Events Labs Inc., that produces several unconferences.

Last month a typical unconference, Web2Open, unfolded on the second floor of San Francisco's Moscone Center. Nearby was a more conventional, \$1,195-a-head conference and trade show, Web 2.0 Expo, whose owner had lent the smaller meeting space. Chris Messina, 26, and two fellow Web2Open organizers stood on chairs in one of the Moscone Center's alcoves, addressing a crowd of about 80. Speaking without microphones, they asked everyone to introduce themselves and offer three "tags," or one-word descriptions, to give a sense of their topics of interest.

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Messina invited anyone present to sign up to speak at the gathering by sticking a Post-it note on one of two big chalkboards he had commandeered. All would-be speakers needed to do was come up with a title and find an open time slot, though Messina noted that "most of the grid is already full."

Dave Winer, a blogger and software developer who organized an early unconference at Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet & Society in 2003, believes one factor spurring the growth of unconferences is their ability to tap the smarts of the people who usually sit mute in the audience. Once someone has attended an unconference, Winer has written, "you're spoiled. I've heard it said many times by people with unconference experience that they can never sit in a dark room with their hands folded, waiting for the Q&A period, listening to a PowerPoint presenter drone on and on."

The unconference movement is also a response to the commercialism of many business gatherings. "I don't see why I should pay hundreds of dollars for the privilege of being sold to," says David Tamés, a consultant and blogger who spoke recently at PodCamp NYC, a free gathering about podcasting held in early April. At a traditional industry conference, Tamés says, "every single panelist is chosen for economic and political reasons—because they're sponsoring it or they know someone in the organization, and they're all doing sales pitches."

Unconferences don't have big-bucks underwriters, and there's usually no financial upside for organizers. But sponsors typically provide in-kind donations, such as a venue, T-shirts,

or food. And a few entrepreneurs are hoping to turn unconferences into for-profit ventures. Doug Gold co-founded a company to produce events that are free but sponsored by deep-pocketed companies like IBM ([IBM](#)), Adobe Systems ([ADBE](#)), and Sun Microsystems ([SUNW](#)). Gold says he's considering a small registration fee to deal with people who sign up but don't show.

Many organizers of traditional conferences aren't yet aware of unconferences. Those that are don't seem close to abandoning their time-tested approach with predetermined agendas, keynote speakers, panel discussions, and sponsors' banners hung on every wall. "We do surveys every year of our attendees, and there really has been no demand for it," says Tara Dunion, a spokeswoman for the Consumer Electronics Assn., whose annual Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas drew an estimated 150,000 in January.

The owner of Web 2.0 Expo, O'Reilly Media, is unusual for trying to integrate unconferences into its events rather than treating them as a threat. "It's an enhancement," says CEO Tim O'Reilly. "We're trying to make our events, like Web 2.0, the happening place."

While there's no dress code at unconferences, there are rules: no passive attendees, only participants. A high-speed WiFi network is mandatory so those present can publish notes and other material. The conference Web site is a collaborative wiki. And if participants find a session boring or they're not motivated to contribute, they're expected to get up and go somewhere else.

The loose structure helps ensure that ideas being batted around are relevant to people in the room and presented with minimal pomp. Sudha Jamthe, an entrepreneur from Palo Alto, Calif., gave a talk about commercializing new technologies at Web2Open. Afterward she was swarmed by entrepreneurs wanting to swap stories. Jamthe recalls her first BarCamp last year as "chaotic." But after one participant created a podcast of her presentation and another blogged about it, "it got more attention than any other presentation I've ever given at another conference." She was hooked.

By Scott Kirsner

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